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DOCUMENTS

THE EXPERIENCE OF A GEORGIA PEON—MY ESCAPE FROM BONDAGE¹

It was on a faraway plantation, where the big bell rang out the call to work, and the overseer shouted at the top of his voice, "All in line." For twenty-seven years I was one among the groups that must hearken to the call of the big bell.

Some years ago the owners of these plantations agreed among themselves to let the colored people have schools, with the understanding that no one should be admitted as a pupil who was old enough to work. So I found myself among those who had to work. I hardly know how the thought came into my mind that I wanted to go to school, for there was no talk of schools around the fireside, but for some cause that I cannot explain I became possessed with the longing for an education. I did not know what for, but, with all my heart, I wanted to go to school.

There were ten of us in our family, including our father. Our mother departed into the beyond when we were very small. Our father was an easy-going man. Any way would do for him. Whatever *was* was right. Whenever I told him that I wanted to go to school he would answer, "You know what the boss says." But I would reply, "Father, he can't *make* me stay here." That was to him a piece of foolishness and he would turn away and say nothing more. At last I saw that I must do my own thinking and plan my own way of leaving. For ten years school was my chief thought. Every day I saw myself turning from the old plantation to what was for me the land of freedom and opportunity.

It was years before the opportunity came. One night I said to my father, "I am going to leave on the first day of May if it costs me my life." For the first time he seemed to realize that I was in earnest. Then he said, "If you leave me you will travel in my tears." That was a horrible thought to me so I did not leave then nor until several more years had gone by, ten in all from the time I first began to think about school.

¹ This narrative was obtained by the editor. It relates an incident which took place between Wrightsville and Dublin, Georgia, in 1903. There is abundant evidence that many other cases of this have been and may be found in the United States.

Finally, one night I said to him: "This is the third and last time I shall tell you I want to go to school. You hindered me for years by telling me that I would be travelling in your tears. That will not answer any longer." When he saw that the blaze had never died out he said: "My son, these may be right thoughts that have come to your mind and their power may lead you to a good end, yet they may be the ruin of you. I would rather follow you to your grave than see you captured and brought back to be punished by these hateful laws they have on these plantations. God will change things after a time and then it may be you can go to school in safety." I saw then that my poor father wanted me to go to school but was afraid I would be punished if I did, as he had known others to do. I said I was going to risk it anyway. As the appointed time drew near he was very sorrowful. Never shall I forget the night of parting. After he had pronounced a benediction upon me he said: "May you ever be happy."

I had really started upon my journey. I had a sack of gingerbread which I did not want to bother with but that my dear sisters persuaded me to carry with me. When daylight appeared I knew it would not be safe to keep the road so I planned out a road of my own. When I came to the spring into which Ponce de Leon had plunged to regain his lost youth I sat down and ate all the bread I could and left the rest. How often afterwards I wished for it!

Not long after I left Ponce de Leon spring I heard the plantation dogs coming after me. "What shall I do now?" was the question. When they had nearly reached me I hid behind a tree and then dashed off as if I saw game ahead. They soon recognized me and became my fast friends.

We slept in the same bed under the same guardian stars. Every night I would thank God for their voiceless sympathy. I shared my meals with them. When I bought crackers I would eat but a few of them and give the rest to my dumb companions. But I saw at last that I must get rid of the poor creatures somehow, although the thought almost broke my heart. When I reached the Mississippi I lashed two logs together and sent my companions out hunting. Then I sailed away on the raft I had made across the Father of Waters. When they returned I looked back and saw them running alongside of the river where they could see me, willing to die with me. I broke down in tears and could not look back any more, because I would have gone back and died with them.

For hundreds of miles I made a path where no human foot had ever trod. I swam rivers and made harbors where no boat had ever landed. At last I reached Texas. For many days I travelled without seeing any house. At night I was afraid of being destroyed by some wild beast, so I would climb a tree and stay awake until morning. But none of these things moved me for I had ten years' study of my journey and whatever it might bring, even death. Coming to a little town I found work with one of my race. I thought all colored people were like those on the plantation so I told my employer everything and from what plantation I came. He said I had taken the right step. Imagine my surprise therefore when I discovered that I was captured! It almost broke my heart. Rather than go back to the old plantation I would suffer death. I pulled away from my captors and ran with all my might. My pretended friend was ahead trying to overtake me but I soon freed myself in a large swamp. This taught me a lesson I did not have to go to school to learn, I found out that some among my own race would put me to death for a dollar and I learned to keep my mouth shut.

When I reached Chattanooga, the nights were so cold I saw I could no longer lie out. For many months I had not slept in a bed, nor eaten a cooked meal. My clothes were those I wore away from home and they were what you can imagine they would be. I did not know how to go about getting a job. Finally I found a good place and before long was earning enough to make me comfortable. But one day when I was out in town I saw a drummer who had sold goods to the store on our plantation, for many years. He recognized me and called out, "The boss is going to break your head, nigger, if he gets you!" This ended my happy home. I had not yet learned to get on a train but with my same dependence I soon ran away to Knoxville. Writing to a certain place from there I learned of my father's death. These were dark days for me. I was strolling about in the cold world without home or friends. I would often ask myself, "What am I living for when there is no heart beating for me?" I began to drift with the current and even thought I would take to drinking. Then the thought came to me that I would be a coward to come so far and then give up. I arose with this thought and determined to act like a man. I entered school in Morristown Tenn., thinking that all my troubles were over. I made low grade with small children. It seemed funny to them to see a man who knew so little. I was there about four months and was beginning to lose my fear when one day I

saw the same drummer again. When he caught sight of me he called out, "Hello, nigger, I thought you were in New York!" Never will sinner tremble in the presence of the Almighty as I did in the presence of that drummer. But he seemed only delighted in spending some time talking with me. He said one of my sisters and several other hands from the plantation had run away and the boss thought I was the cause of it all, and, he added, "If that old man gets his hand on you, they'll take you some night and skin you alive. I told him I saw you in Chattanooga and he said he would make me a present of \$200 if I would let him know where you were if I should see you again. But I would not do you that way for anything. I'll tell you what I will do for you, however. I'll get you a good job up North where you can go to school. I would not stop here." I replied "All RIGHT!" As he was going away he threw me a quarter saying, "Get you a drink, old boy!" I lifted my hat and scraped back my foot as I thanked him for the money. But I was not so easily fooled at that time. I knew just what such sweet talk meant. I saw that it was my move. I had learned then to get on the train. I left Morristown that night and next morning was in Lexington. Being afraid to stay I went to Wilberforce, Ohio, then to Frankfort but finally came back to Lexington again. By that time I had found out that my boss could not carry me back to the plantation, as its laws were not so large in the world as I had thought. I found out that if I violated the laws of the State I could not be carried back without the consent of the Governor of Kentucky. I entered Chandler School without money but happy. For the first time I wrote to my old Miss telling her I was in Lexington in Chandler School. She answered with sweet words about my going to school, and said the boss had spoken kind things about me before he passed away.

The kind teachers of Chandler did their best to unfold those twenty-seven years of ignorance. I had almost to bite the dust to stay in school but I stayed there. I have studied many days hungry—walking the streets afternoons trying to find work for a little to eat.

Since I have been in Lexington I have often been asked, "What do you want with so much education?" Out of those same lips I have heard other students praised for going to school. I did not let this discourage me. Dr. J. E. Hunter, Rev. E. A. Clarke, and Kelly Robinson will ever have my heart-felt gratitude for the kind words of encouragement they gave me. We little realize what a word of encouragement means to one who has lived the life I have.